

The Chronicle

WEATHER

50 this morning, 70s in the afternoon. No rain in sight. One week to go!

Durham, North Carolina

News director Celeste Wesson dismissed from WDBS position

By Fred Zipp
and Christopher Colford

The recent staff reorganization at Duke-affiliated radio station WDBS-FM has left serious questions about the station's commitment to news and public affairs.

The shakeup also has focused attention on the validity of the station's claim that it represents a political and programming "alternative" to commercial broadcasting.

News director Celeste

Wesson has been in favor of a more hierarchical structure.

Sellout

People affiliated with the station have speculated on the extent to which financial constraints will force the station to drop its alternative format. The recent changes indicate a move by the station to compete with more com-

mercial news broadcast and to eliminate women from the broadcasting staff.

Both Tulskey and Yarborough in statements yesterday said that the staff reorganization was purely a financial move. By cutting back on the expense of the news and public affairs departments, Tulskey said, the station could offer competitive salaries to disc jockeys.

Conroy said, however, that the station is in "the best financial shape we've ever been in" in its short-range planning, though WDBS does have a sizeable long-term mortgage.

Profit motive

A source within the station, who declined to be identified, confirmed that the station is not in immediate financial peril. "There's no question that the station will finish in the black this year — the question is, by how much?" the source said. "The name of

a news analysis

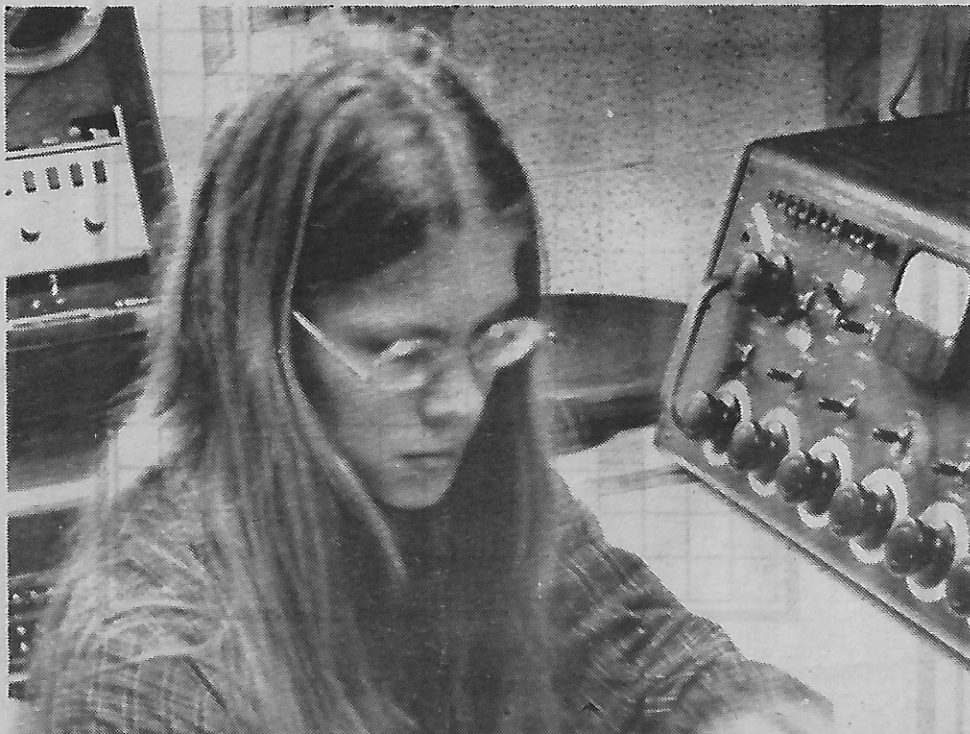
Wesson will leave her full-time job at the station today, after having received her termination notice three weeks ago by general manager Bob Conroy in what Conroy terms a purely financial cutback.

But present and former staff members at WDBS point to political and personal friction among the station's managers and staffers, following WDBS' abandonment last spring of its four-year-old collective decision-making process in

favor of a more hierarchical structure.

commercially successful stations, such as WQDR in Raleigh, for advertisers and a less counterculture-oriented listening audience.

In reaction to Wesson's dismissal, The Feminary, a Triangle area feminist newsletter, charged recently that the station's staff shakeup was engineered by WDBS program director Steve Tulskey and financial consultant Edwin Yarborough, in an effort to end the station's alternative



Celeste Wesson, former news director of WDBS. (Photo by Gary Reimer)

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the game right now is profit."

Tulsky strongly denied that any political considerations entered into the firing of Wesson and the cutback in the news department.

"There was no move to get the women out," Tulsky said, claiming that there would be no cutback in the amount of news the station broadcasts, or its alternative nature.

"That's poppycock," Yarborough agreed, discounting reputed personality conflicts within the station's staff.

Conroy acknowledged that he had heard of widespread disagreement with the station's dismissal of Wesson.

"People are trying to make a conspiracy — I'm not aware of any conspiracy on reducing our political commitment, or our news and public affairs," Conroy said.

Conroy noted that news coverage will continue under the direction of Barb Hedman, who is currently a WDBS announcer. But Wesson's full-time job of coordinating news coverage will become only a part-time job under Hedman, who will also have responsibilities in a daily music show, a weekly women's show and in public affairs.

Though Hedman declined comment on the matter, a source close to the news staff disagreed with Tulsky and Conroy, maintaining that the quality of WDBS' news coverage will decline.

No alternative

"It won't be alternative news at all," the source said. "It'll just be slapped together quickly, without the thought Celeste put behind it."

The source said that Hedman's multiple responsibilities will prevent her from spending the amount of time on gathering news that is adequate for a good news department.

The source said that much of the shakeup in both personnel and politics can be traced to the presence of Yarborough.

"Yarborough is the representative of Charles Huestis," the source said, referring to the Duke University vice president for business and finance. Huestis, who sits as chairman of WDBS' board of trustees, proposed last Oc-

tober that Yarborough be appointed to handle WDBS' financial affairs.

"[Yarborough] knows nothing about radio," said the source, "but makes decisions affecting the station's programming."

Yarborough denied that he was acting as Huestis' stalking-horse, claiming that he had only consulted Huestis on the operations of WDBS when the two met with Conroy.

"Any decisions or recommendations I have made have always been in the best interest of WDBS," Yarborough said. "I'm only trying to do my job."

Yarborough also denied he has at any time had a say in the determination of broadcasting formats at WDBS. "I haven't made any recommendations to the program director," he said.

Huestis has declined to comment on the reorganization despite efforts to question him on WDBS for the past three days.

Yarborough said, "I would support Bob [Conroy] in whatever he said. He has the ultimate responsibility for any decisions made at the station."

Contradictions

But Yarborough differed from both Conroy and Tulsky in explaining the termination of the full-time news position. Conroy and Tulsky maintained that the cutback was made in order to increase the salaries of disc jockeys; Yarborough claimed that the cut in the news department was unrelated to the increase in announcers' salaries.

"It's just a coincidence," he said.

Others saw the reorganization at WDBS as a radical break with the station's original conception as an "alternative" medium. According to Durham freelance journalist Mark Pinsky, the intent of the founders of WDBS was to "create an institution unlike any on the air in North Carolina."

Dave Birkhead of Durham's Regulator Press, which published WDBS' monthly program guide, said that the staff shakeup represented "a power play within the station" in which Tulsky and Yarborough maneuvered the

station into a more commercial approach to the broadcast market.

"For the people who won, the first value is money," Birkhead said. "They want to turn it into a hip version of WQDR." The casualties of the change of philosophy, he said, have been the alternative approach to news and public affairs, the counterculture, and the representation of women on the staff.

The recent WDBS decision to broadcast advertisements for Gallo Wineries, — a decision reversed after adverse audience reaction — was a symptom of the death of WDBS' alternative spirit, he said.

Conroy admitted that financial imperatives were behind the acceptance of the Gallo ads. He maintained that the decision was "not a backtracking on principle."

Tulsky said that there had been little consideration of declining the Gallo ads. "The ads came in the mail, and when you get a 'buy' in the mail, you just put it on the air," he said. "In radio, you've got to do that."

"Our problem is not an excess of commercials," Tulsky laughed.

The pressure of big-time radio has forced a change in priorities at WDBS, Tulsky conceded.

"The emphasis is on having the station function as a broadcasting business. . . in the commercial radio game," Tulsky said. "You've got to look at it that way."

"People feel we have a saleable product, and we're going to try to sell it," Yarborough concurred.

Yet these two, who are alleged to have engineered a "power play" by eliminating the full-time news position, did not even agree on the quality of Wesson's performance as news director.

"Celeste has done a marvelous job," Yarborough said. "Nobody is doubting the job she has done."

"Actually, our news coverage has not been what it's cracked up to be," Tulsky said, praising Wesson's special features but soft-peddling her daily news presentation.

And amid the controversy, Celeste Wesson is resignedly cleaning out her desk and looking for a new job.